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THE NEW PATH.

PUBLISHED BY THE

Society for the Advancement of
TRUTH IN ART.

No. 10.] "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are,
and the things that shall be hereafter." [Feb., 1864.

A CRITICISM ON RAFFAELLE.

"If my works have faults, Raphael's have faults also."—WM. BLAKE.

It has so long been the fashion of critics, connoisseurs, dilettanti, and the public generally, to give the first place among painters to Raffaele, that scarcely a voice has dared to question his right to hold it. He was the admired painter of his day at Rome, and ever since, Italy, incapable any longer of producing such works as his, has praised him for her pride's sake, as well as for his own merit. The fashion once set was easily maintained, for many of the qualities of his works are exceedingly attractive to the crowd of those who know nothing of art as art, while other qualities deserve the highest admiration from artists themselves. It is always safe to praise Raffaele. A man is in good company who does so. He has the general consent with him. The English critics and academicians but echoed the voice of the continent, when they set him at the head of the illustrious line of great painters. "The name which Raffaele has so justly maintained as the first of painters," said Sir Joshua Reynolds. "It is certain," said Barry, "that Raffaele was the greatest painter Italy ever produced." "Raffaello Sanzio, the master of passion,—the painter of human nature," added Opie. "The father of dramatic painting, the painter of humanity," repeated Fuseli. All the authorities agreed. The pre-eminence of Raffaele's greatness was part of the established creed, and under the pres-

sure of authority and of tradition the right of private judgment was abolished in his favor.

It is still commonly regarded as a dangerous and destructive heresy to question his claim to be held the first of painters. A man may have his own opinions about Michael Angelo, Leonardo, Titian, or any other of the masters, without risk,—but should he assert his independence by a doubt as to the validity of Raffaele's supremacy, he is likely to be set down as either ignorant, stupid or perversely wrong.

But men are beginning to recognize that the principles which have guided judgments in matters of art during the last three hundred years have been in great measure false, and that there must be a revision of many decisions which seemed to be settled. The criticism upon art during this long period has been similar to the works of art that have been produced in it. From Leonardo's *Trattato della Pittura* to the "Lectures by the Royal Academicians," is not a greater interval, than from Leonardo's Last Supper to West's Death on the Pale Horse. Many works once greatly admired are now seen to be bad. Many reputations once splendid are now dim. It may be that the progress of knowledge and of true opinion will change the esteem in which Raffaele has been so long held.

There are two criteria by which to

judge the works of a painter. First the truthfulness of his conception of his subject which is the measure of his imagination, of his thought and of his feeling: secondly the execution of his painting which is the measure of his technical skill and knowledge, and of his mechanical ability.

Now if Raffaele be judged by the last of these criteria, he undoubtedly holds a very high place, and we are ready to admit, without present question, all the claims in his behalf. In skill in composition, in grace of design, in elegant facility of execution, few artists have surpassed him. But if he be judged by the first criterion,—the conception of his subjects,—he deserves no praise above that which belongs to a lively and fertile, but often impure fancy.

Looking through the whole long list of his works, and excluding the conventional subjects, such as the Madonna and Child, there is not one, so far as we know, that expresses a noble or a true conception, either of an actual or an imaginary scene; there is not one that is inspired by lofty thought or by a deep feeling. His Galatea, one or two of the Psyche series show very charmingly the prettiness of his poetic fancy,—but even in these the want of real truth of imaginative conception prevents them from holding the first place even in that low department of art to which they belong.

It is to the want of a sense of truth indeed, that Raffaele's want of real power, and the absence of high spiritual qualities from his work, are to be traced. He possessed great knowledge of the human figure, and of human expression. His best portraits are real and most precious for their truthfulness; but he was living and working at a time when, and for men by whom, truth in itself was utterly disregarded.

Religion had become to them a mere showy form of worldly grandeur, and means of earthly power; the Heathen mythology was more agreeable to them than the Christian history; there was no sincerity in their profession; poetry had lost its self-respect, and the epic was degraded to buffoonery and satire; there was neither purity of morals nor simplicity of life. It is not surprising then, that Raffaele did not possess, did not aspire to, what would have rendered him,—him, the pleasant, graceful, obsequious, ambitious, jealous and admired painter of the Court of Rome,—obnoxious and inconceivable to his contemporaries. He belonged to his age. The highest conception of religion he attained is expressed in the face of a woman of unsurpassed beauty, in the eyes of an unreal child. Truth was not in him. He could draw a figure well; he could draw a face more lovely than which, it may be, no man since has drawn; his eye was clear, his hand steady, his faculties in order; his knowledge of his means sufficient for his purposes; his execution marvellous. But with all these powers, and notwithstanding them all, he never painted a picture in which the spiritual elements of art are exhibited in a high degree, or one in which the conception is in true correspondence with the subject. Not one of his great works bears the stamp of genuine creative necessity. Not one of them is vitalized by imaginative truth, not one is inspired by great or elevating sentiment. The cleverness of his style may make his pictures the despair of the mechanical painter, the grace of his design may charm the multitude, but admitting all their great and unquestioned merits, they remain the job works of an intellect influenced by the prevailing false notions of a materialistic and skeptical society, not of a spirit seeking for and

possessed by the truth, conscious of its own powerful originality, and forced by it into expression.

Take for example any of Raffaele's pictures in the Stanze of the Vatican,—the Conflagration of the Borgo, the Battle of Constantine and Maxentius, the School of Athens, or any other, and there is not in one of them an imaginative realization of the scene to be represented, still less a true idealization of it. However masterly the execution, however skilful the design and composition, however effective the parts of these pictures, they represent no reality. They are not true as real or ideal representations of passages in the life of mankind or the experience of individuals.

Fancy for a moment what a great conflagration really is,—the roar and rush and devouring fury of the flames, the dense and wavering clouds of smoke, the sudden bursts and leaps of fire,—fancy the panic, the bewilderment, the hasty efforts, the concentrated energy and interest of the eager crowd;—and then look as the *Incendio di Borgo*, with the impossible fire blazing around unmeaning walls and columns, note the unnatural attitudes and actions of the academic figures of men and women, look at its endless incongruities and feeble exaggerations, and see how far the great painter was from possessing a comprehension of such a scene. The picture is a display of the artist's skill in drawing the human figure; it is primarily a work of vanity, it is to set off his power, and to secure cheap admiration of it. It has no meaning as a representation of its professed subject.

Similar criticism might be applied with justice, and in much greater detail to the other pictures of the Stanze. Numerous and great as may be their merits, the excellence they possess is all of the second order, external not intrinsic; of execution not of conception.

If we take the two pictures which the world has agreed to regard as the greatest of Raffaele's works,—the Transfiguration and the Madonna di San Sisto,—they fail even more completely and more grievously to answer the demands of a standard which measures the worth of art by its essential truth,—truth to nature whether of the external world or of the spirit. Let any one who deems this a hard and false saying, read over thoughtfully and with awakened imagination the narrative of the Transfiguration in the seventeenth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. Let him try to bring before himself in vision the glory, and unspeakable wonder and majesty of the scene,—let him realize its sublime simplicity;—the high mountain, apart, the sacred solitude to which the Master and his three chosen followers had come. Let him behold the sudden but quiet presence of Moses and Elias, the shining face of Jesus as he talks with them, the Apostles filled with reverence and awe, but not over-mastered till the voice comes from the cloud and they fell on their faces and were sore afraid. Then let him look at the picture, with the three uplifted, dancing figures, and Peter, James and John tumbled over upon the ground; and let him conceive if he can the condition of feeling exhibited by the introduction, as an accessory of this scene, of two figures of men (called St. Julian and St. Lawrence in honor of the two Medici, Giuliano, and Lorenzo the Magnificent,) half-hidden under a tree as conscious of impropriety, looking on at the marvellous apparition as if spectators at some theatrical show.

"Where such grandeur and depth of thought, such unexampled excellence," says Kugler in his *Handbook of Italian Art*, "have been accomplished [as in this picture] it becomes us to offer any

approach to criticism with humility." "This anachronism [of the introduction of the two Saints] is the only portion of the picture," says Murray's Handbook, "which criticism may presume to deprecate, without overstepping the humility which such a work inspires."

We will then suggest no further criticism of this work. The lower part of the picture is on a level of thought and feeling and imagination with the upper. Is it a proof of want of humility to declare that it misrepresents the Gospel story, and possesses neither dramatic propriety, nor religious idealism?

We come now to the last, the most important, the most striking instance afforded by the works of Raffaele of the inability of the painter truly to conceive and nobly to represent the subject of his choice,—the Madonna di San Sisto. The incomparable beauty of the Virgin in this picture places her supreme among the host of the beautiful Madonnas of Art. The sweet dignity, the open serenity, the deep tenderness of her countenance and her expression satisfy and delight the heart. Raffaele has here exhibited not merely the noblest powers of his pencil, but the sweetest, purest and deepest parts of his own nature. The native loveliness of his disposition finds expression here, and the peculiar bent of his genius has its clearest manifestation. Did the figure of the Virgin holding her divine Child in her motherly arms stand alone, the picture would in truth be one to compel complete admiration. Not that it represents, indeed, the highest ideal of the mother of Jesus, but that it is the

representation of a pure and exalted woman, of one "whose soul doth magnify the Lord." But the Virgin and her Child are not the whole picture, a glory of angels surrounds them, outside of that glory, encompassing it, —what? the ineffable radiant depth of heaven? or the clouds of light which conceal the throne of the Most High? No, but two tapestry curtains hung from a rod,—suggesting naturally a stage and a *tableau vivant*. And beneath the Virgin on either side is a saint,—the Pope, St. Sixtus, on the one hand, St. Barbara on the other. Of course in the simple attitudes of absorbing and uplifted devotion? Far from it. Saint Sixtus (in heaven?) in splendid pontifical robes, looking up with unconcerned gaze, and St. Barbara anxiously arranging her inconveniently ample garments, with a fine-ladyish air, and as if quite conscious of the observation to which she is exposed. The picture as a whole, from the contrast between its parts, is perhaps the strongest illustration that can be found of Raffaele's want of truth and depth of feeling.

The more thoroughly one studies the works of the greatest masters of art, the more forcibly is the fact impressed upon him, that the test of greatness in art as in life is its truthfulness,—the intrinsic truth of conception, the extrinsic truth of treatment. There is a truth of the spirit, of thought, feeling and imagination, no less than a truth of eye and hand,—and where either of these are wanting the work is deficient in what alone can give it real power, essential beauty, and permanent worth.